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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NICOSIA 000197

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SUBJECT: COMMUNIST CHIEF UNDECIDED ON PRESIDENTIAL RUN

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: AKEL desires continued cooperation with coalition mates DIKO and EDEK, Secretary General Dimitris Christofias informed the Ambassador March 5. Nonetheless, party leaders have not yet determined whether to support a re-election bid by President Tassos Papadopoulos, urge the coalition to dump the incumbent in favor of an AKEL man, or run an independent campaign in the 2008 race; he expected a decision at the party congress in June. On the Cyprus Problem, Christofias lamented the lack of movement on the Gambari Process negotiations but cautioned that the international community's efforts "to rush" the 2004 Annan Plan had led to its defeat. AKEL remained committed to cross-Green Line political contacts, specifically the AKEL-CTP connection, since "only through dialog with Turkish Cypriots -- children of the same homeland -- can we end the division of Cyprus." "TRNC President" and CTP boss Mehmet Ali Talat disappointed him, however. While not the "Denktash II" his harshest Greek Cypriot critics claimed, Talat's pro-solution message seemed more diluted every day, Christofias argued, a result of pressure from Turkey's military and "Deep State." END SUMMARY.

An AKEL Candidacy? Maybe, Perhaps, We'll See.

¶12. (C) Stop Two on this latest round of outreach to the island's political party leaders (Septels), the Ambassador March 5 called on AKEL Secretary General and President of Parliament Dimitris Christofias. The cherubic (in appearance, if not always in demeanor) commissar was in excellent spirits, praising the Ambassador's demeanor and handling of the Cyprus Problem and bilateral relations with the RoC. "American officials have not always been helpful to our national cause," he alleged. "When former Secretary Powell invited then-'TRNC Prime Minister' Talat to Washington, for example, in effect he had politically upgraded the breakaway state." In response, the Ambassador reminded Christofias that this meeting and other engagements with the current T/C leadership were grounded in the sides' support for a reunification agenda, which the United States strongly supports

¶13. (C) Christofias turned quickly to domestic politics and Cyprus's 2008 presidential elections. On his mind was recent speculation that AKEL was hedging its bets over supporting Papadopoulos's re-election bid. "Like I told (leading Cypriot daily) 'Phileleftheros' in yesterday's interview, I'm NOT going to be clear on this," he asserted. AKEL favored continued coordination with the President's DIKO and Socialist EDEK. But the party had not yet chosen between three courses of action: supporting Papadopoulos as the coalition candidate next February, lobbying EDEK and DIKO to

back AKEL's choice instead, or fielding a candidate independent from the coalition. Each approach offered pluses and minuses, and the decision was not his alone to take. "The party congress will have a say," he explained, referring to AKEL's yearly rank-and-file gathering, taking place this year in June.

¶4. (C) Personal ambition -- a drive for the Presidency -- would not affect AKEL's choice, Christofias swore. His current job provided plenty of satisfaction. AKEL long had been the party of democracy in Cyprus; Christofias hoped to make it the party of liberation (from Turkish troops), rapprochement (with Turkish Cypriots), and eventual reunification of the island under a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation.

Talks Going Nowhere, Fast

¶5. (C) In tune with the Ambassador, the Communist boss rue'd the slow pace of Gambari Process negotiations; eight months after the UN undersecretary had brokered the deal, its envisioned technical committees and working groups had not yet convened. Here, Christofias toed the Papadopoulos line, placing blame squarely upon Turkish Cypriots. Why Talat was slow-rolling on the property element befuddled him, for example. Certainly property comprised a final settlement issue and was therefore grist for the working groups, but it also affected day-to-day life and thus merited technical committee attention. Local UN negotiator Michael Moller had proven a capable mediator, Christofias ventured, but Turkish Cypriot negotiator Rashid Pertev was unreliable -- Pertev often supported positions one day, only to flip-flop the

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next. The cause for such behavior, Christofias surmised, was Turkish military and/or "Deep State" dissatisfaction with Pertev's (and by extension, Talat's) tack.

¶6. (C) "My good friend, Mehmet Ali" was how Christofias referred to the Turkish Cypriot leader. Talat's CTP had shown great courage during the reign of T/C strongman and perennial partition-supporter Rauf Denktash, he argued. For decades the parties had collaborated, staging massive rallies, sponsoring bi-communal youth outings for youth, and searching for an equitable CyProb solution. AKEL and CTP leaders continued to meet twice a month, on either side of the Green Line. The CTP seemed to have lost its pro-solution way, however. "I know Talat's in a tough spot with Turkey," Christofias admitted. But the harder line the "TRNC President" was espousing did him and his community no favors. The petroleum issue appeared a perfect case in point -- did Talat believe that vaguely threatening the internationally-recognized Cypriot Government would create a climate conducive to settlement negotiations?

Sides Pulling Further Apart

¶7. (C) Christofias lamented the rise of nationalism on both sides of the island. Especially troubling were polling results that showed Cypriot youth leaning toward partition, not reunification. Each day that passed made solving the CyProb that much harder, he concluded. Christofias agreed with the Ambassador that both communities' public messages toward the other required re-thinking. Already he had urged Papadopoulos to muzzle Government Spokesman Christodolou Pashiardis, with some success. Pashiardis's T/C counterpart, Hassan Ercakica, was a friend since student days, Christofias revealed. He would deliver to Ercakica the same "if you can't say something good..." message at their next meeting.

¶8. (C) The ongoing debate in EU circles over Turkish Cypriot "isolation" frustrated the AKEL leader. "They have succeeded

in diverting attention from the true problem, Turkey's occupation of an EU member state," Christofias winced. The RoC had great stories to tell, having extended free medical care, issued 75,000 passport, and opened its labor market to T/Cs. Its propaganda machine had failed miserably, however, leaving Greek Cypriots constantly on the defensive. Now Talat and company were pushing hard on direct trade, and they seemed to enjoy support in the European Commission and current EU Presidency. Nicosia would oppose tooth and nail any EU actions amounting to an upgrade of the "pseudostate," Christofias promised.

Comment

¶9. (C) Media here are agog over the possibility the "dissatisfied" Communists might abandon the governing coalition and go it alone in 2008. After all, their reasoning goes, senior partner AKEL's polling numbers nearly double those of DIKO, yet the party's influence in major policy areas -- read, the Cyprus Problem -- fails to keep pace. Nevertheless, the power-sharing arrangement serves AKEL and Christofias well. Never before have party faithful directed four ministries and run powerful parastatal organizations, for example. A solo AKEL presidential run could deliver greater spoils still, but probably would fail and leave the party weaker, unacceptable to the risk-averse Christofias. We therefore consider his public mulling but a tactical ploy and believe the Communist leader, after a great measure of Kabuki dancing, will announce the party's support for Papadopoulos at its congress this summer.

¶10. (C) Christofias's CyProb gloom-and-doom came as no surprise, either. Instinctively the most pro-solution of the governing coalition's parties, AKEL seems genuinely troubled by the slow pace of negotiations and ever-harsher barbs the communities are trading. Yet his same risk aversion will prevent the AKEL SecGen from leaning too heavily on Papadopoulos for more flexibility in the local process, as long as the voting public remains relatively comfortable with the Cyprus status quo. END COMMENT.

SCHLICHER